

HEARING ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN VIETNAM
COMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS
AND INTERNATIONAL OPERATIONS
AND
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

STATEMENT OF DR. NGUYEN DINH THANG
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
BOAT PEOPLE SOS

March 29, 2006



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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee,

The next eight months present a rare window of opportunity to truly influence Vietnam's policies towards religious freedom, human rights, and human trafficking.

Vietnam hopes to achieve permanent Normal Trade Relations status this Summer and enter the World Trade Organization by the end of the year. The Vietnamese government is preparing to welcome world leaders, including President Bush, to the APEC summit in Ha Noi this November. It is in Vietnam's interest to convince the international community that it is a country in transition to a more open society. In that context, the Vietnamese government has become more sensitive to the Country of Particular Concern (CPC) designation by the U.S. Department of State.

Last year Prime Minister issued Directive on Protestantism and instructions on the implementation of the Ordinance on Religion and Belief. To avoid sanctions, Vietnam has signed on to a roadmap to improve religious freedom.

These changes, while promising, have had little real effect on the ground. So far only three of some 4,500 Christian house churches have been approved for conducting religious activities. Many house churches, such as the General Baptist Church, the Fellowship Baptist Church and the Southern Baptist Church in Saigon and many more in other provinces have not been allowed to even register. The authorities told them that they would review applications only on an informal basis and would notify when time comes for formal submission. Months have passed and there has been no word from these authorities.

I would like to note that registering religious activities is not the same as legal recognition as a religious institution. Not a single house church has received legal recognition.

It appears that the Vietnamese government conducts a two-pronged policy. The central government promises changes to appease the concerns of the international community, particularly the U.S. At the same time provincial and local officials use administrative maneuvers to harass people of faith, persecute religious leaders, and block religious activities. In fact the Ordinance on Religion and Belief gives these authorities full discretion to authorize religious activities or recognize a religious institution, making it much harder for the international community to monitor the situation in Vietnam.

We have noted a significant increase in violations of religious freedom after Prime Minister Phan Van Khai's visit to the U.S. last June. Following is an illustrative sample.

- (1) July 2005, the government of Son Tay Village, Quang Ngai Province, pulled down the houses of ten Protestant families, declaring that Son Tay was a "clean village" untainted by a foreign religion.
- (2) August 2005, the government of Son Thuong Village, Quang Ngai Province, declared that their community did not tolerate Protestants and burned the home of Dinh Van Hoan, a member of the General Association of Vietnamese Evangelical Churches-South, because he did not renounce his faith.
- (3) September 2005, seven Hmong Protestants in Chi Ca Village, Ha Giang Province were tortured with electric rods for "following the American religion." Three of them were mortally wounded.

- (4) October 2005, Ma Seo Sung, an evangelical group leader in Lao Cai Province, was beaten six times in a day because he refused to admit that Protestantism was “an illegal faith.”
- (5) November 2005, two female members of the Mennonite Church in Central Highland were detained for seven days. They were repeatedly beaten and tortured.
- (6) December 2005, the people’s committee of Xin Man and Quang Binh Districts of Ha Giang Province detained a dozen Christians appointed as group leaders by the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-North. The authorities used fabricated letters denouncing them as impostors in the name of their Church.
- (7) January 2006, prior to a visit to Kontum by a delegation of the American Embassy, A Ngai and his fellow members of the Mennonite Church were chased into the woods. The U.S. delegation was reportedly led to meet a person who pretended to A Ngai.
- (8) February 2006, the Presbyterian Church in Darlak Province applied for official recognition. The provincial government denied the application on the ground that it had not received the order from the central government. The authorities ordered Pastor Nguyen Van Dan to take down the cross they displayed in front of his house and stop all prayer services.
- (9) March 2006, the public security police, People’s Committee officials, and the militia surrounded the home of Ms. Hoang Thi Le, where 30 members of the Emmanuel Christian Church were holding their Sunday prayer. Ms. Le was told that her house would be burned down if she continued to allow prayer service at her home.

The Hoa Hao Buddhist Church is no less persecuted. On August 5, 2005 Monk Vo Van Thanh Liem was arrested in front of his Quang Minh Tu Buddhist Temple in An Giang Province. On Sept 14, 2005, in a closed court, he was sentenced to seven years in prison convicted of the charge “opposing public Authorities.” He had submitted a written statement to the hearing held by this Committee in June of last year. Mr. Bui Thien Hue, a Hoa Hao Buddhist who also submitted his written testimony at last year’s hearing, is currently under house arrest.

On February 18, 2006, plain-clothed police of Can Tho Province beat up Truong Van Thuc and his brother and then dumped them into the river. Three weeks ago Thuc was sentenced to house arrest for the reports he had written concerning violations of human rights and religious freedom.

On February 16, Venerable Thich Quang Do, Deputy Head of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), and 11 UBCV monks were assaulted and detained for six hours as they boarded the train to visit their Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang, who remained in detention in Binh Dinh Province. Two weeks ago the public security police expelled Buddhist nun Thich Nu Thong Man from her own pagoda in Khanh Hoa Province. The expulsion order cited “wrongful acts by being a member of the Unified Buddhist Church, in violation of the [State-sponsored] Vietnam Buddhist Sangha’s Charter and the laws of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam”.

With religious persecution still widespread, I am concerned that many victims do not have full and prompt access to U.S. refugee programs. While I am encouraged that the relatives of Father Nguyen Van Ly have made it to the U.S. under the Priority One Refugee Program, it is troubling that they are the only ones, with only one exception, who have left Vietnam under this program in the past 12 years.

I am also concerned that those victims who have successfully escaped to neighboring countries are not receiving due protection by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for

Refugees. I am aware of a dozen cases with very compelling claims that have been denied refugee status. I am also aware of many recognized refugee cases in Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia that UNHCR has not referred for resettlement for years.

A major source of trafficking in persons, Vietnam each year exports tens of thousand men, women and children to sweatshops and the sex industry in Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Malaysia, Japan, and the Czech Republic. Vietnam has refused to pay \$3.5 million in damages to 321 victims in the Daewoo American Samoa case as ruled by the High Court of American Samoa.

Last December I spent more than a week in Taiwan to meet with many trafficked victims. Taiwan currently has one hundred thousand contract workers from Vietnam. Twenty thousand of them had escaped their employers. In late 2004 Vietnam sent bounty hunters to Taiwan to round up escapees. By October 2004 some 500 escapees were captured. They were forced to work to pay off their debt to the brokers before repatriation. A number of female workers were raped by their brokers. Dropped from Tier 1 to Tier 2 in last year's Trafficking In Person's annual report, Taiwan has introduced several measures to combat trafficking. In response, Vietnam has shifted to South Korea as destination for its contract workers.

The situation in Malaysia is even worse. By late 2005 an estimate 80,000 Vietnamese workers were laboring in Malaysia. Malaysian brokers have total control over these workers, keeping their documents and regularly "re-selling" them to higher bidders. Some of these brokers are mafia bosses. Since I was not issued a visa to join you in Vietnam late last year, I spent time in Kuala Lumpur to meet with many trafficked workers. Many were not paid for their work. Others were not allowed to return to Vietnam until they paid off their debt to the brokers. Actually I talked to a group of workers who attempted to escape back to Vietnam through Cambodia as their travel documents had been confiscated. Some female contract workers were lured into prostitution.

Considering the gravity of the problem, I believe that Vietnam belongs squarely in Tier 3.

There is still hope if our government takes full advantage of the present window of opportunity to push for real improvements. I offer the following recommendations:

- (1) Use test cases as benchmarks of real progress: We will provide the State Department the list of house churches that have applied for recognition or registered their activities without success and the list of refugee cases not allowed access to U.S. interviews or not issued exit visa.
- (2) Engage and fund the independent churches to conduct human services, including HIV/AIDS prevention and re-integration of repatriated trafficking victims.
- (3) Organize a series of conferences in Vietnam on human rights, civil society, human trafficking, and religious freedom during President Bush's visit to Vietnam.

I commend you for holding this hearing. It will send a strong message to the Vietnamese communist leaders as they prepare for their Congress, to be held in three weeks, to choose new leaders and set national policies for the next five years.